We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars that are spacious; luxurious cars that are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. . . . We are ruled by extravagant expectations. . . . By harboring, nourishing, and ever enlarging our extravagant expectations we create the demand for the illusions with which we deceive ourselves. And which we pay others to make to deceive us.


Project Censored’s founder, Dr. Carl Jensen, coined the term Junk Food News almost thirty years ago. Responding to Jensen’s criticism that news in the United States suffered from censorship, members of the press claimed that they lacked sufficient space in print or time on air to cover everything important. They called it news judgment, not censorship. Unsatisfied with this explanation, Jensen decided to expand Project Censored’s scope of inquiry to include not only “the news that didn’t make the news,” but also what establishment media actually did cover.
Jensen and his Sonoma State University students found that the major corporate media outlets reported titillating, nonsensical, tabloid-type stories as if they were real news. Jensen cataloged these frivolous stories, identified the recurrent themes that unified them, and contrasted them with serious news that the media could have covered instead, like the stories Project Censored has researched each year. Junk Food News was born.2

Across three decades, the problem of Junk Food News—or “Twinkies for the brain,” as Jensen called it—has worsened. So much so that Jensen’s successor as Project Censored director, Dr. Peter Phillips, created an expanded category, News Abuse. This category consists of otherwise newsworthy stories about powerful people or important political issues that the corporate media render trivial and inconsequential through sensationalism and spin. Like Junk Food News, News Abuse epitomizes the failure of corporate media to inform the public in ways that promote democratic self-government.

Our annual chapter on Junk Food News and News Abuse does more than catalog inane news coverage. It looks beneath the surface to examine the cultural values and frames that give rise to faulty news coverage.

ANTECEDENTS TO JUNK FOOD NEWS AND NEWS ABUSE: PSEUDO-EVENTS IN AMERICA

The year 2012 is the fiftieth anniversary of Daniel Boorstin’s The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America.3 Among the most prescient critics of twentieth-century American culture, Boorstin not only documented the rise of manufactured events in an increasingly media saturated culture, he also anticipated the hyperreal mediascape of the twenty-first century: “The story of the making of our illusions—‘the news behind the news’—has become the most appealing news of the world.”4

Boorstin analyzed pseudo-events at a time when the mass media were undergoing rapid growth and change in a cultural context of rising consumerism and an intensifying Cold War. Pseudo-events, such as press conferences and political candidate debates, were the products of public relations gurus like Edward Bernays, who wrote
that “the engineer of consent must create news.”5 In a world increasingly made for television, ever more scripted pseudo-events became principal ingredients of news.

Pseudo-events are now the norm. From faux “reality” television shows to the canned happenings of American Idol, millions of viewers turn eagerly to their screens for a vicarious fix as the day’s celebrities chase after the perfect job, the perfect house, the perfect car, the best performance, and, of course, the perfect partner. As Boorstin observed, “We are ruled by extravagant expectations.”6

These desires not only drive consumer demand for the faux world of reality TV but also for “news” media, which consequently display many of the same sensational features. Corporate American news culture increasingly favors dramatic myopia of the personal over sober analysis of public policy and the social distribution of power and wealth. Titillating images and interpersonal dramas distract us from the real issues facing our local communities, our nation, and our place in the world as a whole. Thus, Boorstin observed, “We have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. We demand them. And we demand that there be always more of them, bigger and better and more vivid.”7

The Voice of Freedumb: The Rise of Anti-Intellectualism and Junk Food News

The television show The Voice proclaims to herald America’s new hot talent, its new “voice.” But if this reality program’s stars are the voice of Americans, they aren’t singing, or saying, much. From shows about shark hunting or house hunting, to rags-to-riches programs about hoarder finds or pawnshop culture, America is amusing itself to death in ways that media theorist Neil Postman might not have anticipated.8 The lines between entertainment and news blurred long ago, and now it seems life imitates reality TV and pseudo-event news.

If one tunes into the corporate media, it's apparent the culture has suffered a civic disconnect and is permeated with anti-intellectualism, from insipid forms of infotainment to carnival-like political debates. If that’s not enough, in Texas the Republican Party’s platform includes the aim of halting the teaching of critical thinking skills in public schools altogether, as they are a threat to “the student’s fixed
beliefs” and lead to “undermining parental authority.”9 It doesn’t get much more anti-intellectual than that. Sadly, these developments are hardly out of sync with what many scholarly works are revealing about the decline of critical thinking and general knowledge among Americans, about the triumph of partisanship and belief over reasoned argument, and about how mass media contribute to these problems.10

Morris Berman, author of a trilogy of books on America’s decline over the past eleven years, summed up what’s wrong in a string of stinging statistics.11 In his review of Berman’s work, George Scialabba asked, “How Bad Is It?” He concluded, “Pretty bad,” recapping some of the lowlights that Berman’s books identify:

Here is a sample of factlets from surveys and studies conducted in the past twenty years. Seventy percent of Americans believe in the existence of angels. Fifty percent believe that the earth has been visited by UFOs; in another poll, 70 percent believed that the U.S. government is covering up the presence of space aliens on earth. Forty percent did not know whom the U.S. fought in World War II. Forty percent could not locate Japan on a world map. Fifteen percent could not locate the United States on a world map. Sixty percent of Americans have not read a book since leaving school. Only 6 percent now read even one book a year. . . .

Among high-school seniors surveyed in the late 1990s, 50 percent had not heard of the Cold War. Sixty percent could not say how the United States came into existence. Fifty percent did not know in which century the Civil War occurred. Sixty percent could name each of the Three Stooges but not the three branches of the U.S. government.

. . . Of the 20 advanced democracies in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the U.S. has the highest poverty rate, for both adults and children; the lowest rate of social mobility; the lowest score on UN indexes of child welfare and gender inequality; the highest ratio of health care expenditure to GDP, combined with the lowest life expectancy and the highest rates of infant mortality, mental illness, obesity, inability to afford health
care, and personal bankruptcy resulting from medical expenses; the highest homicide rate; and the highest incarceration rate. . . .

Contemplating these dreary statistics, one might well conclude that the United States is—to a distressing extent—a nation of violent, intolerant, ignorant, superstitious, passive, shallow, boorish, selfish, unhealthy, unhappy people, addicted to flickering screens, incurious about other societies and cultures, unwilling or unable to assert or even comprehend their nominal political sovereignty.12

The corporate media contribute to American anti-intellectualism when they invest precious journalistic resources in the production and distribution of Junk Food News and News Abuse, rather than real news. In this chapter we critically assess the celebrity takeovers of the news media, whether through sports drama, Donald Trump’s ongoing obsession with President Barack Obama’s birthplace, America’s infatuation with royalty, the Muppets’ “attack” on Fox News, and more McNews® than anyone should have to stomach. Reach for the antacids as mental engines idle and the images in Plato’s cave flicker on flat screens, all while Americans fiddle as Rome burns in a reality series that may not be renewed for another season. Here is this year’s Junk Food News media menu and what the corporate media could have and should have been covering instead if they had practiced sound journalism.

**JUNK FOOD NEWS FOR 2011–12**

*The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.*

—Daniel J. Boorstin

**SOPA Gets “Tebowed”**

Traditionally, sex scandals, violence, and celebrity exploits have been mainstays of Junk Food News; however, in fall 2011, the corporate media temporarily abstained from these worldly delights in favor of a “higher path” by focusing on National Football League (NFL) quar-
quarterback Tim Tebow, whose public behavior had the media dub him “God’s quarterback.”

Tebow is a devout Christian with a history of displaying his faith during games by painting biblical verses under his eyes and kneeling in prayer with head bowed. In 2010, when the NFL (and its collegiate counterpart, the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA]) forbade messages inscribed in players’ eye paint, Tebow found another way to demonstrate his faith during games: kneeling in prayer. The media christened this stance “Tebowing,” inspiring an Internet meme, with celebrities and fans imitating Tebow’s pose, and spinoffs including holiday cards with the quarterback “Tebowing” to baby Jesus, T-shirts, and Saturday Night Live skits.

With Tebow fever rising, the media found religious significance in Tebow’s statistics in a game during which he completed ten passes for 316 yards, an average of 31.6 yards per completion. For some, the figure invoked the biblical passage John 3:16, which led to “John 3:16” becoming the most searched term on Google for January 9, 2012, the day after the game. Religious organizations capitalized on Tebow hype. John Cass, of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association website, reported to the Christian Post that after the “316” game, 170 people accepted Jesus Christ. The fervor continued through April 2012, when Pastor Joe Champion, at Celebration Church in Texas, announced at an Easter service featuring Tebow that when it comes to “Christianity, it’s the Pope and Tebow right now.”

Although Tebow is not the first to use sport as a platform to proselytize, the media’s uptake is unprecedented. Thus, some news outlets equated criticism of Tebow with criticism of Christianity. Fox News in particular has interpreted Saturday Night Live skits and comments by former player and sports commentator “Boomer” Esiason—which both mock Tebow—as attacks on Christianity itself by secular media sources with a pro-Muslim/anti-Christian bias. Fox sports reporter Jen Floyd Engel asserted that “all hell would break loose” if a Muslim player made similar displays of faith, because “you cannot mock Muslim faith, not in this country, not anywhere really.”

While Tebow preoccupied pundits and public alike, more pressing stories went underreported. Media Matters for America noted that little or no attention was paid to the Stop Internet Piracy Act (SOPA),...
which Congress was developing and debating at the same time. From October 26, 2011, through January 12, 2012, television news and “opinion broadcasts” aired forty-one segments about Tim Tebow while devoting only two to SOPA coverage. It is likely that corporate media ignored SOPA due to their interest in the passage of the bill. Fortunately, it was reported by independent media sources, including Wired, AlterNet, and the Daily Censored.

Proponents of SOPA argued that it offered owners of copyright-ed material greater protection against piracy, especially by foreign infringing sites. The bill also would have afforded the government greater ability to monitor Internet content, including the authority to shut down offending sites. These mandates entailed a level of unprecedented governmental supervision of the Internet. SOPA’s reach apparently triggered concern, as several online media outlets protested SOPA’s potential censorship of the Internet by calling an online blackout.

The driving champion of SOPA legislation was Texas Representative Lamar Smith, who garnered support from business interests including the Recording Industry Association of America, the Motion Picture Association of America, and the US Chamber of Commerce. As Ben Dimiero of Media Matters for America reported, Comcast (NBC and MSNBC), News Corp. (Fox News), CBS Corporation (CBS), Time Warner (CNN), Disney (ABC), and the National Cable & Telecommunications Association hired twenty-eight different lobbying firms to lobby Congress on SOPA.

While corporations were buying congressmen in hopes of controlling the Internet, America debated divine intervention on the football field.

Military Spending Can’t Keep Up with the Kardashians
Quickie marriages and quicker divorces are nothing new to Hollywood culture. However, few received the media coverage that socialite Kim Kardashian and National Basketball Association star Chris Humphries enjoyed. Their wedding, which cost an estimated ten million dollars, was celebrated in a two-night, four-hour television special titled Kim’s Fairytale Wedding: A Kardashian Event, broadcast to coincide with the finale of season six of Keeping Up with the Kardashi-
The wedding broadcasts had a combined audience of 8.4 million viewers, and *E! Entertainment* ultimately aired thirty-two hours of coverage. Just seventy-two days later, news of the subsequent divorce drew the ire of reporters and fans, who charged that the whole affair was a publicity stunt, prompting Kardashian to issue this public explanation: “I had hoped this marriage was forever, but sometimes things don’t work out as planned. We remain friends and wish each other the best.” The statement seems insincere, particularly when one takes into consideration that the couple signed a prenuptial agreement and gained a reported eighteen million dollars from magazine deals, TV coverage, and endorsements.

The celebrity gossip site TMZ initially reported the divorce, and the news spread virally to other corporate outlets. According to the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, the Kardashian–Humphries divorce was the number one blogging topic and the fifth most discussed topic on Twitter for the week of October 31 to November 4, 2011.

While the corporate media had no trouble keeping up with American demand for celebrity gossip, they have been reluctant to cover lobbying efforts to oppose military spending cuts. According to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), US military spending has nearly doubled since 2001, and is six times greater than China’s, the world’s second largest military spender. Globally, nations spent $1.6 trillion on defense, with the United States accounting for 42.8 percent of total military expenditures. At the time of the Kardashian divorce, the Center for International Policy and Common Cause issued a report showing that, for 2010, the defense industry spent $144 million on lobbying and employed over 1,000 lobbyists. The report also found that the defense industry contributed $22.6 million to political candidates during the 2009–10 election cycle. That amount included $1.1 million that went to members of the “super committee” charged with a deficit reduction plan, in an effort to avoid military cuts.

While entertainment media encouraged Americans to feel cheated by the short run of the Kardashian–Humphries union, they did little or nothing to educate the public about the long-term *ménage à trois* among defense contractors, their lobbyists, and Congress—even
though the American public foots the impressive bill for *that* ongoing revel.

**Royal Escape from Guantánamo Bay**

After a ten-year relationship, England’s Prince William and Catherine Middleton married. US corporate media settled in London, investing millions of dollars to cover the media event. ABC pledged twenty hours of coverage. Highly sought-after “royal experts” signed contracts worth over $100,000, some with multiple outlets. Based on Neilson Report data, the *Huffington Post* reported that US media offered more coverage than even the UK press.\(^{27}\) A Pew Research Center study found that, during the run-up to the royal wedding, two-thirds of Americans felt it was getting too much coverage,\(^{28}\) though lack of interest did little to dissuade the corporate media from investing heavily in the event.

While the mainstream media force-fed Americans’ undesired royal wedding coverage, prisoners confined without charge or trial at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba challenged the human rights abuses of their US captors. Jason Leopold reported in *Truthout* that fifteen “high-value” Guantánamo detainees were staging a hunger strike to protest the conditions of their confinement, which included an indefinite detention order signed by President Obama in March 2011.\(^{29}\) The executive order called for their relocation to another camp at the facility with worse conditions and greater restrictions.

The hunger strike lasted about a month and may have been a last-ditch effort to expose conditions at Guantánamo. “The men know that this is just the latest sign that the Obama administration has no intention of closing Guantánamo,” said Candace Gorman, an attorney for one of the hunger-striking prisoners, Algerian detainee Abdal Razak Ali.\(^{30}\)

Royal wedding coverage also preempted coverage of the Stop Internet Piracy Act (SOPA). A report issued by Media Matters for America found that during October 26 through January 12, 2012, corporate and television media outlets aired forty-seven segments about the royal wedding.
From Birthers to Death: Obama’s Citizenship Matters More than Civilian Deaths

In late May 2012, real estate mogul Donald Trump drew media attention by renewing his doubts about whether President Obama was born in the United States. “A lot of people are questioning his birth certificate,” Trump told CNBC. “. . . There are some major questions here and the press doesn’t want to cover it.” As if contestants on Trump’s Celebrity Apprentice, the press got to work and covered the story. Again. This time reporters hung the tired story on a new hook, speculating how Trump’s fixation on Obama’s birth certificate might impact Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign. Trump has been one of Romney’s high-profile backers, and the two were scheduled to appear together at a Las Vegas fundraiser for Romney.

Coverage of Trump’s remarks focused on Romney’s damage control and the Obama campaign’s efforts to capitalize on it. Romney told CNBC that, although he disagreed with Trump about Obama being born in the United States, he would not condemn Trump for claiming so. “I don’t go around telling all my supporters what they should think or what they should say,” Romney replied. The press also covered the Obama campaign’s efforts to contrast Romney with 2008 candidate John McCain, who corrected his supporters when they made spurious claims about Obama’s citizenship during his campaign. A widely quoted Obama campaign video said, “As the Republican nominee, John McCain stood up to the voices of extremism in his party. Why won’t Mitt Romney do the same?”

While broadcast media and other factions of the establishment press dutifully covered another round of electoral spectacle, a far more serious story involving legality and the Obama administration went all but unnoticed. On May 29, 2012, the New York Times published a key investigation on the Obama administration’s escalating drone campaign in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Based on interviews with three dozen current and former Obama advisors, the report documented how President Obama has personally approved drone strikes on specific individuals, and how his administration has embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties: by treating all military-aged males in a strike zone as “combatants,” unless posthumous intelligence could prove otherwise.
Since June 2011, when US chief counterterrorism advisor John Brennan claimed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had not killed “a single non-combatant in almost a year,” critics of the CIA drone strikes, including some journalists, have questioned official accounts of civilian deaths caused by those attacks. The *Times* report documented concerns of “false accounting” regarding civilian casualties within Obama’s administration. Given that news outlets often rely on government-supplied information about those killed or injured in a strike, the *Times* story suggested that headlines announcing the death of a certain number of “militants” really only indicate that a number of men were killed, and it gives further reason to be skeptical when officials deny that drone strikes cause civilian deaths.

Despite findings of vital importance to understanding US drone programs, corporate media essentially ignored the *New York Times* report and its implications. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) issued a media advisory noting that among the three major broadcast networks, only CBS mentioned the report, while one of the authors of the *Times* report, Scott Shane, appeared on PBS and NPR. “What was more newsworthy than the president personally approving drone strikes on specific individuals?” FAIR’s media advisory asked.

The contrast between the establishment media’s fixation on Trump’s “birther” concerns and the unaddressed questions about the Obama administration’s escalating campaign of drone strikes could not be more profound. While corporate media fan the embers of a burnt-out debate over Obama’s citizenship, they largely ignore smoking gun evidence of his administration’s willingness to embrace a redefinition of “civilian” that excludes hundreds of innocent victims of US drone strikes around the globe.

**Next on the McNews: The Return of the McRib**

The corporate news outlets were abuzz with reportage of actual junk food, including “fried butter on a stick” at the Iowa Straw Poll, and the much-heralded return of the McRib in 2011–12. The “rib-like” sandwich (actually pork shoulder) has had six farewells since 2004. The Associated Press, CNN, *USA Today*, and Fox News offered a plethora of coverage, which Tommy Christopher of Mediaite termed “McNews,” leaving legitimate news stories starving for attention.
Corporate media intensely reported on the mystery-less mystery of the McRib disappearance, on how an unofficial McRib Locator showed how loved the McRib was among fans on Facebook and Twitter, and on the video game titled *The Quest for the Golden McRib.* Willy Staley of TheAwl.com reported that the McRib’s reappearance is no mystery, as it coincided with downturns in the price of pork. McDonald’s continues to perpetuate the attraction and mystery online by maintaining a full-time staff that measures the response and effects of social media upon its products. It maintains lists of bloggers and encourages them to write about the company, even providing them with coupons for free items (pseudo-events know no bounds).

A comedian was the only voice who noted that the media’s infatuation with the McRib was leaving more important stories uncovered. Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* mocked media outlets for covering the “rib-like sandwich” instead of covering the independent investigation that cleared the scientists who were accused of falsifying data to prove global warming. Right-wing pundits ignored the findings and sided with studies funded by oil magnates the Koch brothers, who concluded that climate change was a hoax. When Climategate was a scandal at the expense of the believers it garnered mass attention, but when it proved the naysayers wrong, the media gobbled the McRib.

The McRib story also diverted attention from the court decision in the case *NDLON v. ICE.* The case compelled Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) to disclose an internal memorandum that claimed that racial profiling and deportation policies were in fact legal. The court’s decision to force the document’s release was regarded as a rebuke on the government agencies that had attempted to resist and ignore Freedom of Information Act requests. Corporate media in the US were more interested in the return of the McRib than informing Americans about their rights to knowing what the government is doing behind closed doors.

**Faux News: Murdoch’s Puppets vs. Henson’s Muppets**

Fox News knows that controversy builds ratings, and since 2009 has been creating one out of thin air, when the network began an ideological feud with the Muppets. It began with a Muppet skit conservatives considered to be a thinly veiled jab at Fox: In one *Sesame Street*
episode, Oscar the Grouch runs a television network entitled Grouch News Network (GNN). A caller phones the show to complain that the content is not grouchy enough, then proclaims: “I am changing the channel. From now on, I am watching ‘Pox’ News. Now there is a trashy news show.” 47 Larry O’Conner, a conservative blogger, argued: “I can’t even sit my kids in front of Sesame Street without having to worry about the Left attempting to undermine my authority.” 48

Fox has resorted to calling the Muppets “felt-covered socialists.” On Follow the Money, right-wing guests charged that a Muppet character, a fictional oil magnate named “Tex Richman,” threatened to undermine capitalism, conveying an anticorporate, anti-wealth agenda to children. 49 Dan Gainor, a Fox News contributor and the vice president of business and culture for the conservative Media Research Center, bemoaned that Hollywood has repeatedly affronted the petroleum industry. He claimed that Hollywood’s films fail to remind “people what oil means for most people which is fuel to light a hospital or heat your home.” 50 The Muppet writers threw fuel on the fire by writing a joint statement from Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy: “It’s almost as laughable as accusing Fox News of, you know, being news.” 51 The Huffington Post, CBS News, ABC, the Los Angeles Times, and the New York Daily News dedicated hours of coverage to the story. One is hard-pressed to put it better than the Muppets themselves in the lyrics to the original The Muppet Show from the 1970s, as they sang, “Why do we always come here? I guess we’ll never know. It’s like a kind of torture, to have to watch the show.” This would be more fitting as the soundtrack to the corporate media’s nightly broadcasts.

The fabricated Muppet War received coverage in place of the AlterNet story, “Radiation From Cell Phones and WiFi Are Making People Sick—Are We All at Risk?” The article by Christopher Ketcham used findings from multinational scientific organizations indicating numerous safety concerns with electromagnetic radio waves. 52 Previous studies minimizing these risks were largely industry funded, which raises questions about those studies’ objectivity. 53 However, Ketcham’s findings were no match for the Muppet War.

The Muppet War also distracted attention from the dangers of nuclear power, which were documented in Justin McCurry’s Guardian story, “Fukushima Fuel Rods May Have Completely Melted.” 54 Karl
Grossman of FAIR noted that, for years, the nuclear industry has taken advantage of a compliant corporate media to enable deception, obfuscation, and denial about the risks of nuclear power. The lack of coverage may be due to extensive financial links between corporate media and the nuclear power industry; prominent nuclear energy titans General Electric and Westinghouse own or have owned major media outlets, including NBC and CBS, among others. NPR has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions from Sempra Energy and Constellation Energy, leading to “pro-nuclear” stories. Rupert Murdoch and Fox News have championed the deregulation of nuclear power. Shying away from the Muppet War, independent media sources have reported that radiation from the Fukushima reactor has already caused deaths in the United States.

**NEWS ABUSE AS PROPAGANDA AND DISTRACTION**

*We must first awake before we can walk in the right direction. We must discover our illusions before we can even realize we have been sleepwalking.*

—Daniel J. Boorstin

News Abuse became part of Project Censored’s scope when Dr. Peter Phillips expanded Junk Food News to include news stories that treated serious societal matters but suffered from distortion. News Abuse occurs when corporate media transform a partially factual news story into propaganda through spin, obfuscation, and omission. As such, News Abuse is subtler than Junk Food News. The term draws attention to how corporate media report important news stories in partial ways that make the story distracting, titillating, and even confusing, often at the expense of the story’s fundamental facts and overall significance. The following stories from 2011–12 give evidence of the wide range of News Abuse.

**Conservative Pundit and Pop Diva Reach #1 on Grief Porn Charts**

There is little that corporate news media love more than a good cry. In the past year, they have eulogized the deaths of radio and television personality Dick Clark, kitsch artist Thomas Kinkaid, author and illustrator Maurice Sendak, singer Etta James, former Monkee
Davy Jones, Beastie Boy Adam “MCA” Yauch, Bee Gee Robin Gibb, singer Donna Summer, pop diva Whitney Houston, and conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart, among others. Though news media have a clear responsibility to report the deaths of important public figures, they have no legitimate license to peddle what British journalist Mick Hume called “mourning sickness,” or what Robert Yates, assistant editor of the Observer, has aptly described as “grief porn.” As with Michael Jackson’s death in 2009, the media frenzies over the deaths of conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart and pop singer Whitney Houston crossed the line from responsible reporting to grief porn.59

Breitbart died March 1, 2012, of an enlarged heart and heart disease.60 Not since Reagan’s death has there been such a public outpouring of right-wing grief. Fox News described the blogger as a courageous “happy warrior” fearlessly seeking the truth.61 Forbes cast Breitbart as one of the “most prominent critics of liberal elitism,” with condolences from those across the political spectrum.62 Conservative media hailed Breitbart’s lies and propaganda as exemplary journalism, citing among his notable “achievements” the editing of a video to portray statements made by Shirley Sherrod as racist, which destroyed her career; exposing private photos of Rep. Anthony Weiner, leading to his resignation; and posting spurious video footage that discredited the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).63 Rolling Stone’s Matt Taibbi, who had previously been harassed by Breitbart supporters, was among the few journalists who bravely attacked Breitbart’s inflated record.64

“True believers” refused to accept that a heart condition, and not foul play, caused his death.65 Prior to his death, Breitbart had promised to release a damning video of Barack Obama before the election.66 Breitbart supporters flooded the Internet with allegations of the Obama administration’s involvement in Breitbart’s death. These turned out to be false, according to the final coroner’s report.67

Breitbart’s death was no match for the tidal wave of attention paid to the death of pop singer Whitney Houston, who topped the grief porn charts in February 2012. The diva’s life was rife with quintessential elements of the grief porn narrative: talent and stardom eroded by drug addiction, an abusive marriage resulting in erratic behavior, a hysterical orphaned daughter, and allegations that foul play led to her
demise. News media coverage of the pop icon was extensive. ABC-News.com devoted an entire section to Houston, featuring speculative articles such as “Was Whitney Houston in Financial Trouble?” and “Was Whitney Up for ‘X Factor’ Judge?” Within a month, Reuters.com had provided 118 articles on Houston’s death, while FoxNews.com and CBSNews.com had posted 135 and 128 articles, respectively. CNN ran a whopping 380 articles on Houston’s death. With that obscene number, we hope outlets have finally reached their climax on grief porn coverage, as mourning sickness has likely already kicked in among the viewing public.

**Corporate Media Profit from Tragedy (Again)**

The trial of twenty-two-year-old Casey Anthony, who stood accused of murdering her two-year-old daughter Caylee in 2008, became a media sensation in 2011. Extensive pretrial media coverage created problems in seating an untainted jury. The trial itself lasted six weeks and was covered by all the major outlets. In the words of one publication, “As perverse as it may sound, the Casey Anthony trial is the kind of news event that TV executives dream of.”

Though Anthony was ultimately acquitted of murder but found guilty of aggravated child abuse and four misdemeanor counts of providing false information, her lawyer J. Cheney Mason lambasted the press for coverage that amounted to “media assassination.”

Anthony almost instantly became the focal point of the corporate press. The audience for HLN’s *Nancy Grace* rose 150 percent during the trial, while *Dr. Drew* ratings tripled after devoting its show to the trial. The Pew Research Center said it was the most followed story from July 7 to July 10, 2011. Bing, the Microsoft search engine, identified the Casey Anthony trial as the most searched story of 2011—even topping the death of Osama bin Laden.

The corporate media obsession with Anthony overlooked the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) federal court case in opposition to electronic devices being searched at border checkpoints. Under the current law, authorities may search all electronic items without suspicion. Government documents revealed that thousands of Americans had been searched. Catherine Crump, staff attorney with the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy and Technology Project, argued
that searching materials “without reasonable suspicion is unconstitutional, inconsistent with American values and a waste of limited resources.” However, Anthony’s trial by media garnered the attention from the case with Bill of Rights implications.72

**Indiana Workers’ Rights “Threaten” America’s Super Bowl**

In February 2012, after more than a month of pitched battle, Indiana lawmakers passed a right-to-work bill, making Indiana the first Rust Belt state and the nation’s twenty-third overall with such a law. But the real story, as far as corporate media were concerned, was whether union protests would disrupt the NFL’s Super Bowl. Not only did corporate coverage obfuscate public understanding about the consequences of right-to-work laws, it pitted the Super Bowl against the preservation of workers’ rights. Fear of the game’s interruption, rather than the bill’s effects, became the focal story.

There can be little doubt that right-to-work laws have hastened US labor unions’ decline. Roger Bybee wrote that elites in the old Confederacy first instituted right-to-work policies, which have historically reduced wages and weakened unions by forcing them to provide services and protections to laborers who pay no dues, and by providing incentives to employers to screen out union sympathizers.73 “‘Right to work,’” Bybee observed, “is a brilliant piece of corporate marketing, as such laws provide absolutely no rights to workers and have nothing to do with guaranteeing full employment.”74

The track record of right-to-work states is poor at best: such states lack constraints against corporate power, low wages, and reductions in spending on health care, education, and other public goods. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that 11.8 percent of American wage and salary earners belonged to a union, representing 14.8 million workers. In 1983, union members accounted for 20.1 percent of the total workforce and represented 17.7 million workers. These numbers are considerably lower in the southern states.75

But Indiana’s lawmakers were not concerned with statistics like these. Spurred by the state’s corporate interests and enabled by corporate news coverage that amounted to cheerleading on behalf of right-to-work, they did a Super Bowl hustle of their own and passed the law.
Who’s the Rotten Apple? This American Life Goes Daisey Crazy

On January 6, 2012, author and actor Mike Daisey appeared on NPR’s This American Life to discuss his monologue, “The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs.” The monologue referenced Apple’s largest supplier, Foxconn in China, and their alleged immoral business practices and unsafe working conditions. In his monologue, Daisey, who is not a journalist, describes a trip to China to investigate Foxconn’s working conditions, which he found horrible. For example, Daisey told This American Life about a man working at a Foxconn factory who was poisoned by n-hexane, a “potent neurotoxin.” Daisey claimed that many Foxconn workers were similarly exposed. “Their hands shake uncontrollably. Most of them can’t even pick up glass.”

On March 16, 2012, Ira Glass, host of This American Life (TAL), dramatically retracted the story, alleging that Daisey had “fabricated” aspects of it. The retraction countered Daisey’s version of Foxconn conditions with accounts by two other people: Rob Schmitz, a reporter for NPR’s Marketplace, and Cathy Lee, Daisey’s interpreter in China. Though many interpreted this retraction as a wholesale refutation of Daisey’s claims against Foxconn and Apple, Glass did acknowledge that much of what Daisey had reported regarding working conditions had been confirmed independently. Instead, the decision to retract hinged on more subtle aspects of Daisey’s story: he had not witnessed all the events he described firsthand, and he had compiled some of his story from observations made by others. While the TAL retraction portrayed Daisey as a rotten reporter, Tim Worstall of Forbes magazine took advantage of the situation to effectively pardon Apple and Foxconn, acknowledging less-than-ideal conditions in Apple-supported factories but urging the American public to accept that working conditions in Chinese factories are uniformly inferior to those in the US.

Both TAL’s retraction and Forbes’ absolution sought to shift the frame in ways that simultaneously blamed Daisey and soft-pedaled the investigative work of professional journalists who, independent of Daisey, had documented the same dangerous and exploitative conditions for workers. For example, Censored 2012 honored Dan Margolis for his story—filed in January 2011, an entire year before Daisey’s TAL appearance—documenting systemic conditions that threaten
workers’ health in factories contracted with Apple, as well as Apple’s efforts to hide those conditions behind “a secretive supply chain.”

Conditions had certainly not improved by the time of the original TAL story featuring Daisey, as Malcolm Moore’s January 2012 report for the Telegraph (UK) indicated: Moore reported that 150 Foxconn factory workers threatened to kill themselves by jumping from the factory’s roof, prompting management to install safety nets to prevent them. In 2010, eighteen Foxconn workers did jump in protest and fourteen died as a result. If Apple’s corporate mantra is “Think Different,” they’ll likely have to reboot pretty soon if they are to escape the slave labor culture they’ve emulated, one that has been a mainstay of capitalist and imperialist countries’ practices for a very long time.

**Fox News: Occupy Occupy’s Agenda**

Since the Occupy Wall Street protests began in fall 2011, corporate media have lashed out at protesters despite their overwhelmingly peaceful, nonviolent methods. Of course, less-than-flattering corporate coverage is no surprise when the Occupy movement emerged to question corporate greed and big business dominance. Hyperbolic, right-wing Fox News—the champion of past Tea Party protests—has provided the most egregious examples of anti-Occupy reporting, though rarely with sound logic and often with fallacious reasoning. Bill O’Reilly has made numerous attacks on the Occupy movement, calling protesters “anti-capitalist” and dismissing them as apologists for President Obama, who O’Reilly named as actually responsible for the destruction of the nation’s economy. In his attempt to portray Occupy as a partisan movement along traditional (i.e., Democrat vs. Republican) lines, O’Reilly has ignored the reality that many in the Occupy movement are also critical of Obama and the Democrats.

Corporate coverage of Occupy protests across the country has downplayed—or entirely ignored—acts of violence committed by police forces against Occupy participants. For example, Scott Olsen, a twenty-four-year-old marine who served two tours of duty in Iraq, was hit in the head with a tear gas canister while standing peacefully across from police in Oakland; and Dorli Rainey, an eighty-four-year-old Occupy protester, was pepper sprayed alongside a pregnant woman in Seattle. These were hardly isolated incidents. Stephen Rosen-
feld of AlterNet reported that local police departments, supported by a decade of Homeland Security funds, now show “no reluctance to put on riot gear, conduct mass arrests and use pepper spray, tear gas and concussion grenades . . . just as they have shown no reluctance to spy on protesters and preemptively arrest people they suspect, often erroneously, of being leaders.”

Despite evidence from a number of sources that the US is becoming a police state (see “Signs of an Emerging Police State,” Censored 2013’s top story, as reported in chapter 1), Fox commentators and other reactionary pundits continue to attack Occupy as the catalyst of violence and oppression.

**EPILOGUE**

*America today is not the country it once was—nor is it the nation it could be. We need a free and aggressive press more now than ever before, a press that will stand up to those who would control it and assume once again the independence it once celebrated.*

—Project Censored founder Carl Jensen, 1993

Carl Jensen’s call for a free and aggressive press is as necessary today as it was twenty years ago. By examining the corporate media’s Junk Food News and News Abuse, we call readers to recognize the importance of a free press—one that informs the public about important issues of the day—in service of democratic self-government. That recognition entails both critique and affirmation, as delicately captured in one of the concluding metaphors from Boorstin’s *The Image*:

> The least and the most we can hope for is that each of us may penetrate the unknown jungle of images in which we live our daily lives. That we may discover anew where dreams end and where illusions begin. This is enough. Then we may know where we are, and each of us may decide for himself where he wants to go.

Identifying and tracking Junk Food News and News Abuse allows us to penetrate deeper into the “unknown jungle of images”—with-
out becoming lost in it. Once we recognize Junk Food News and News Abuse as recurrent species in that jungle, we are less likely to be enthralled by sensational celebrityhood or entwined by the distractions of pseudo-events. Only then will we find ourselves, as individuals and communities, in a clearing where we can see, and act, lucidly.

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Notes


4. Ibid., 4–5.


7. Ibid., 5–6.


16. Ibid.


18. For example, as early as 1977, Rollin Stewart, a born-again Christian, appeared at major sporting events including NFL playoff games, the Olympics, the Indy 500, and the NBA Finals, wearing a rainbow wig, a shirt stamped with the word “repent,” and holding a sign that read “John 3:16.”


30. Ibid.
32. In part because of Trump’s prior claims, Obama’s campaign released his Hawaiian birth certificate during the 2008 presidential race; when this failed to quell suspicions, the Obama administration released his long-form birth certificate in April 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/04/27/president-obamas-long-form-birth-certificate.
36. ABC’s George Stephanopoulos pressed Brennan on his remarkable claim. For one example of independent press scrutiny, see Chris Woods, “Analysis: Why We Must Name All Drone Attack Victims,” Bureau of Investigative Journalism, May 10, 2012, http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/05/10/analysis-why-we-must-name-all-drone-attack-victims. As Woods notes, the CIA and other elements of the US intelligence community have aggressively attacked the bureau for its reporting.


49. Ibid.


52. Christopher Ketcham, “Radiation from Cell Phones and WiFi Are Making People Sick—Are We All at Risk?”, AlterNet, December 2, 2012, http://www.alternet.org/environment/153299/radiation_from_cellPhones_and_wifi_are_making_people_sick_are_we_all_at_risk.


56. Ibid.


63. “Conservative Commentator Andrew Breitbart Is Dead at 43,”


74. Ibid.


77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.


80. Ibid.


89. Boorstin, The Image, 261.